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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant challenges confronting college instructors who teach international politics survey courses is the coverage of current events issues and how to stimulate student interest about the issues. This paper describes two techniques, a current events sweepstakes and a Great Decisions roundtable, designed to infuse current events into the curriculum. Conducted on a weekly basis, the sweepstakes involves presenting to the students a general question relating to a newsworthy event which requires a written answer. The sweepstakes winner is selected randomly from the correct answers and awarded a simple prize such as a candy bar. A five- to ten-minute discussion about the event follows the award ceremony. The Great Decisions Roundtable, sponsored nationally by the Foreign Policy Association, is designed to supplement the course curriculum and the "Study Guide for the Roundtable" serves as a required text. Scheduled approximately once every four weeks for an entire class period, the roundtable's underlying purpose is to give students an opportunity to exchange ideas and to articulate their own views with limited interference from the instructor. While the participating students rated the two techniques favorably, neither the sweepstakes nor the roundtable successfully motivated them to acquire additional information related to the issues. Four tables are included that reflect the cognitive impact, the instructional impact, and the motivational impact of these activities, as well as a breakdown of the responses by political science majors and non-majors. (DJC)

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Current Events And The International Relations Curriculum:

Instructional Strategies

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One of the more significant challenges confronting instructors of international politics survey courses is the coverage of current events issues. Most students have limited knowledge of the unfolding events, leaders and institutions shaping the present global environment.[1] Perhaps even more disturbing is their general disinclination to seek out information which might enhance their overall awareness.

The task of devising appropriate infusion strategies is not a simple one. On the one hand, one must resist the temptation of devoting too much classroom time to a discussion of current issues. The range of historical material and theoretical concepts which must be addressed in such courses is simply too great to allow inordinate concentration on breaking news items. At the same time, however, a failure to consider these issues might prevent students from appreciating the relevance and significance of some of the more abstract ideas and past events incorporated into the core curriculum.

To be sure, a number of approaches may be utilized to focus attention on contemporary matters. The use of up-to-date examples when presenting material pertaining some of the broader themes covered in the course is particularly helpful. A willingness to deviate from the syllabus periodically to describe and assess the implications of emerging crises or especially noteworthy events might also prove useful. Moreover, the selection of a supplementary text oriented toward current issues could serve to organize discussions in a more systematic and sustained fashion.[2]

This paper will discuss two additional infusion techniques -- a Current Events Sweepstakes and a Great Decisions Roundtable. Designed specifically for students in an international politics survey course, these exercises are intended to acquaint them with select contemporary issues worthy of their attention. Following a description of the activities, the results of a survey

administered to participating students will be reported to assess their overall impact.

The Current Events Sweepstakes seeks to encourage student awareness of major events unfolding in the international arena. At the start of each week, a general question relating to an item which has received considerable media coverage is presented to the class. Students wishing to respond are invited to submit their written answers to the instructor, who selects from among the returned papers on a random basis until a correct response is uncovered. Once the Sweepstakes winner has been determined, a brief discussion (5-10 minutes) of the issue is conducted to highlight some of its more salient implications. The procedure is repeated each week, so as to generate a field of participants for the final Sweepstakes event during the last week of the course. At this time, a series of questions (of somewhat greater difficulty) are prepared. The student(s) with the greatest number of correct answers is declared the Sweepstakes Champion.

Although admittedly a "gamey" device, the Sweepstakes is an entertaining method for introducing current events issues into the classroom without disrupting unduly the flow of the core curriculum. To maximize student participation, some additional inducements are provided. The questions posed are of limited difficulty and usually involve only the identification of a country, organization, meeting or leader in the headlines. Moreover, a prize (e.g., candy bar, chips, cake) is awarded to each weekly winner and a Sweepstakes Certificate is presented to the overall Champion. Most students seem to appreciate this added dimension, which injects some levity into the proceedings. They look forward to the activity, enjoy the spirit in which it is presented and gain some insight into the issues covered.

A more elaborate undertaking, the Great Decisions Roundtable introduces students to some of the critical foreign policy issues confronting the United States. Sponsored nationally by the Foreign Policy Association, Great Decisions is primarily a community-based program designed to involve citizens in discussion groups to consider U.S. options in dealing with a range of foreign policy challenges. Each year, eight issues are selected for consideration and a rather objective Study Guide summarizing each of the issues and suggesting U.S. policy alternatives is made available. In this instance, the Study Guide serves as one of the required texts for the course.

Roundtables are scheduled for an entire class period approximately once every two weeks. Their underlying purpose is to give students an opportunity to exchange ideas and to articulate their own views with limited interference from the instructor. Each session begins with a brief presentation (approximately 15 minutes) elaborating upon the background material covered in the Study Guide. The discussion leader concludes the initial phase of the activity by posing a leading question designed to focus attention on the current state of U.S. policy and to encourage assessments of that policy. At times, additional questions must be formulated to sustain conversation and to probe student attitudes. No effort is made to forge a consensus. As the session nears completion, however, the facilitator attempts to categorize the range of viewpoints that have been expressed and to determine levels of support for the various policy alternatives considered.

A unique feature of the exercise is the use of guest discussion leaders. In this case, students enrolled in an upper level Great Decisions Practicum course fulfill this role. Each practicum student specializes in one of the Great Decisions issues and is responsible for conducting discussion groups for

any number of community groups participating in the local Great Decisions program. It should be noted, however, that other types of arrangements could prove equally productive. Selected students or panels of students from the survey class itself might be given responsibility for running the respective Roundtable sessions. While this would probably require some additional work on the part of the instructor in terms of preparing the facilitators and insuring the flow of the discussions themselves, it would preserve the student-centered nature of the exercise. This seems particularly advisable in larger sections, where opportunities for direct student involvement are quite limited. Of course, the Roundtable is also conducive to the use of outside lecturers for so long as sufficient steps are taken to allow for ample student input into the ensuing discussions.

As is often the case with supplementary classroom activities, it is somewhat difficult to evaluate the precise impact of the Sweepstakes and Great Decisions Roundtable. Observing students scanning the morning newspaper prior to receiving the weekly Sweepstakes question or contributing substantively to the Great Decisions discussions can be quite rewarding. However, more often than not, one can detect considerable numbers evidencing thorough disinterest in the endeavors. A more systematic assessment is provided by a group of students exposed to these respective exercises, who were asked to evaluate (on a four point scale with 1 = Very Much and 4 = Not At All) the cognitive, instructional and motivational impacts of both the Sweepstakes and Great Decisions Roundtable. The results of the survey suggest some of the more significant contributions and limitations of the activities.

As conduits through which students might have broadened their awareness of critical current events and U.S. foreign policy issues, the Sweepstakes and

Roundtable rated quite favorably (TABLE 1). Thus, in an important sense, these exercises seemed to have gone a long way toward accomplishing their basic purpose. Yet, there is also evidence to suggest that they may have been of use in the coverage of other segments of the curriculum. Whereas the Sweepstakes was seen as fairly helpful in promoting understanding of some of the more theoretical course material, the Roundtable offered greater appreciation of the difficulties involved in making foreign policy decisions.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The instructional impact of these activities was also quite pronounced. Not unexpectedly, students reacted to them most favorably as productive methods for incorporating discussions of current events issues (TABLE 2). One might suspect, however, that these endorsements stemmed at least partially from the entertaining or somewhat unconventional nature of the enterprises. Such efforts to capture student interest are often useful in and of themselves. In this instance, however, the diversification of instructional techniques provided additional benefits. The utilization of student facilitators for the Roundtable proved somewhat less effective than anticipated. On a few occasions, some difficulties were encountered in sustaining interest in the discussions. Yet, more importantly, these exercises helped forge a more positive classroom environment while creating opportunities for student input and participation that might not have been available otherwise.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Still, it is apparent that these encounters went only so far in altering existing study patterns (TABLE 3). The Sweepstakes performed credibly as a means for encouraging students to keep abreast of major international events arising throughout the semester. However, neither the Sweepstakes nor the Roundtable was particularly successful in motivating them to acquire additional information relating to the issues under consideration. In the case of the Roundtable, moreover, the adopted format did not appear to have much impact on student willingness to complete assigned readings prior to the discussions themselves.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

It is interesting to note that, in most cases, the assessments of political science majors (both prospective and declared) were higher than those of non-majors (TABLE 4). This is not surprising, inasmuch as majors would have been expected to evidence greater overall enthusiasm for the material presented in the course. Nevertheless, the Sweepstakes appeared to be especially useful in dealing with the often vexing problem of generating commensurate levels of interest among non-majors. These students were more likely to seek additional information pertaining to the questions covered in the exercise, as well as other currrent events issues. While this follow-through may not have extended to other segments of the course, it does suggest a greater awareness of the relevance of these matters and some willingness to probe them independently.[3]

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Thus, at least in this instance, the Current Events Sweepstakes and the Great Decisions Roundtable contributed significantly to the substantive consideration of emerging global and U.S. foreign policy issues. These activities are limited in scope and are not likely to alter appreciably the work habits of students in survey courses. However, they offer opportunities to engage students more directly and to broaden their knowledge of the issues. Relatively easy to implement and adaptable to a variety of learning environments, the Sweepstakes and Roundtable seem well suited to the task of introducing students to some of the events and personalities shaping the world in which they live.

Notes

[1] For an elaborate assessment of student awareness of international affairs, see College Students' Knowledge and Beliefs: A Survey of Global Understanding (Educational Testing Service, Global Understanding Project, 1981). Also see Robert B. Woyach, Understanding The Global Arena: A Report on The Ohio State University Global Awareness Survey (Mershon Center, The Ohio State University, March 1987).

[2] The Annual Editions: World Politics (Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.) is a particularly good choice as a supplementary text. Updated annually, it offers brief, non-technical articles on a range of international issues and themes.

[3] The survey was administered to students in two sections of the introductory international politics course in which these activities were implemented. No significant differences were detected in the response sets. Similarly, no distinguishable patterns were evident when controlling for the class year of the students surveyed.

TABLE 1: COGNITIVE IMPACT

	MEAN
SWEEPSTAKES	
Knowledge Of Events	1.62
Understanding Of Broader Material	1.97
ROUNDTABLE	
Knowledge Of Foreign Policy Issues	1.80
Knowledge Of Foreign Policy Decisionmaking	1.83

(n=86)

TABLE 2: INSTRUCTIONAL IMPACT

	MEAN
SWEEPSTAKES	
Productive Method	1.49
Contribution To Learning Environment	1.66
ROUNDTABLE	
Productive Method	1.64
Opportunities For Participation	1.93
Student Facilitators	2.08

(n=86)

TABLE 3: MOTIVATIONAL IMPACT

	MEAN
SWEEPSTAKES	
Follow Events	1.95
Seek Additional Information Regarding Questions	2.12
Seek New Current Events Information Sources	2.40
ROUNDTABLE	
Seek Additional Information	2.28
Prior Reading Of Text	2.30

(n=86)

TABLE 4: MAJORS v. NON-MAJORS

	MAJORS	NON-MAJORS
SWEEPSTAKES		
Knowledge Of Events	1.44	1.72
Understanding Of Broader Material	1.94	1.98
Productive Method	1.41	1.54
Contribution To Learning Environment	1.56	1.72
Follow Events	1.88	2.00
Seek Additional Information	2.22	2.06
Seek New Information Sources	2.63	2.26
ROUNDTABLE		
Knowledge Of Foreign Policy Issues	1.63	1.91
Knowledge Of Foreign Policy Decisionmaking	1.56	1.98
Productive Method	1.50	1.72
Opportunities For Participation	1.66	2.09
Student Facilitators	1.94	2.17
Seek Additional Information	2.19	2.33
Prior Reading Of Text	2.16	2.39
	(n=32)	(n=54)